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SUBJECT: LEBANON: WITH MARCH 14, DAS HALE STRESSES U.S.
LEBANON, SYRIA POLICIES UNCHANGED

REF: PARIS 1855

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) March 14 leaders shared their concerns about regional developments with visiting NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary David Hale, especially perceived western (especially French) rapprochement with Syria and possible focus of the next U.S. administration on Iran, at Lebanon's expense. The March 14 leaders who had visited Paris recently told Hale they were dismayed to find the French "enthusiastic" towards Syria. DAS Hale stressed that U.S. policy toward Lebanon and Syria had not changed, despite recent meetings with Syrian Foreign Minister Moallem, and said the U.S. was committed to continuing support for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). March 14 Secretariat members also shared their strategy for the 2009 parliamentary, including the participation of international observers, engaging the Lebanese diaspora, and promoting a unified message. End summary.

2. (C) NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary David Hale met with several March 14 leaders and Secretariat members during his October 4-8 visit to Lebanon. On October 4, Christian leaders Minister of State Nassib Lahoud, MP Nayla Mouawad, and stalwart March 14 member Sheikh Michel Khoury hosted a dinner in his honor, also attended by the Ambassador, DCM, and Pol/Econ Chief. On October 7, March 14 SYG Fares Souaid hosted a second dinner, which included Druze MP Marwan Hamadeh and National Liberal Party leader Dory Chamoun (both of whom, with Souaid and MP Samir Franjeh, had just returned from a trip to Paris where they met with senior French government officials to express March 14 concerns about French rapprochement with Syria, reftel), March 14 Secretariat members Antoine Haddad and Michel Mecattaf, and journalist May Chidiac. The Ambassador, DCM, Pol/Econ Chief, and Senior LES Political Advisor also attended the second dinner.

DAS HALE STRESSES ENDURING
U.S. COMMITMENT TO LEBANON

3. (C) At both dinners, DAS Hale stressed that U.S. policy toward Lebanon and Syria had not changed. Lahoud, who said

he will accompany Sleiman on his October 11-12 trip to Saudi Arabia, said Sleiman was pleased with his U.S. visit. However, many in March 14 feared that the U.S. commitment to Lebanon would wane with the upcoming presidential election. Hamadeh, at the October 7 dinner, echoed Lahoud, saying strong statements by the next U.S. administration asserting continuity in U.S. support for an independent and sovereign Lebanon would be critical to March 14. The opposition is betting on a change in U.S. policies towards Lebanon, he warned.

¶4. (C) DAS Hale replied that regardless of who wins the U.S. election, the Middle East will be prominent on the foreign policy agenda. While there will be changes of tone and personalities, U.S. interests in the region are enduring and will not change, he stressed. Furthermore, Lebanon was considered a success story, in the sense that things were moving in the right direction following the 2005 Syrian withdrawal and recent election of a new president and resumption of parliament, and the U.S. commitment to our interests in Lebanon had bipartisan support and should not change.

¶5. (C) Mouawad, who attended the Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Denver, said the perception in Lebanon was that the Democrats see only Iran and Pakistan. Lahoud, who also attended some of the DNC, agreed that for the Democrats, "It's all about Iran," adding that they appeared willing to talk with all of Iraq's neighbors. Khoury noted that it was not possible to separate Iran and Hizballah.

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¶6. (C) DAS Hale agreed with Khoury, noting Iran's presence in both Lebanon and Gaza. Lahoud expressed growing concerns that there would be a war against Iran. DAS Hale replied that if Iran was successful in advancing its nuclear weapons programs, other countries in the region might be inclined to take matters into their own hands, which he agreed would be a dangerous situation. Hale also noted that Russia, which had supported the most recent UNSC Resolution against Iran, was back with the U.S. on this issue.

¶7. (C) Lahoud also expressed concerns that the Turkish-sponsored talks between Israel and Syria would leave Lebanon in the cold. He stressed that the Syrian track includes Hizballah, therefore Lebanon must be a player. DAS Hale said the U.S. welcomed any effort to expand peace and that the Turks seemed very committed, but the U.S. priority remained the Palestinian track. However, the U.S. would not allow an agreement at Lebanon's expense. Lahoud suggested that there should be parallel indirect talks between Lebanon and Israel.

U.S. COMMITTED TO SUPPORTING ARMY

¶8. (C) DAS Hale told his March 14 hosts that part of the purpose of his visit was to attend the October 6 Joint Military Commission (JMC). Referring to President Sleiman's recent meeting with Secretary of Defense Gates, Hale said the U.S. and Lebanon shared a common vision and the JMC was the launch of a process to increase U.S. support for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). He added that it could take time to reverse two decades of Syrian influence within the army. Responding to Haddad's question about the need for Congressional approval, Hale confirmed that congressional notification was needed for some items, both in terms of dollar value and type of equipment, but said there was strong bipartisan support for Lebanon in Washington.

¶9. (C) Khoury stressed that U.S. military assistance would help convince President Sleiman of the benefits of U.S. friendship and aid him in his efforts to counter Hizballah. Hamadeh said supporting the LAF is essential because it would help March 14 at the National Dialogue table discussions of

the national defense strategy. He welcomed President Sleiman's postponement of the dialogue until November 5, saying that adopting a defense strategy under the current balance of power would give Hizballah the upper hand, whereas negotiating with a strengthened LAF would help March 14.

CONCERNED ABOUT FRENCH
RAPPROCHEMENT WITH SYRIA

¶10. (C) Souaid, who, along with Hamadeh, Chamoun, and MP Samir Franjeh, had just returned from Paris where they met with FM Kouchner and other senior French officials (reftel), said the purpose of the visit was to express March 14's concerns about French rapprochement with Syria. He warned that Hizballah is very active in Europe, particularly with the European parliament and in Brussels, and that its influence in the French media and some circles within the French administration also was growing. Souaid attributed this in part to French commercial interests with Qatar and Syria.

¶11. (C) March 14 was dismayed to find the French "enthusiastic" towards Syria, with Kouchner reportedly feeling confident that Syria would distance itself from Iran. Hamadeh said Kouchner believes Syria will adopt a very strong position against Hizballah, and would stop its arms shipments to Lebanon, adding that, "The French believe Syria does not want to find itself in the middle of a possible war between Iran on the one hand and the U.S. and Israel on the other."

¶12. (C) On the other hand, Hamadeh said the French stressed their support for Lebanon's independence and sovereignty, which they viewed as "red lines." Hamadeh echoed Souaid's assessment of growing Syrian influence in France, especially

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in the media and think tanks, adding that it was very visible in comparison with the previous French administration under Jacques Chirac. Hamadeh commented that relations between France and Saudi Arabia were very bad, and cold between Egypt and France. However, he added that some within the French government were advocating better relations with Egypt and trying to convince President Sarkozy not to put all "of the French eggs in the Qatari basket."

SPECIAL TRIBUNAL MUST START
BEFORE 2009 ELECTIONS

¶13. (C) Hamadeh stressed the importance of the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon, asking for U.S. help to ensure that it was up and running at least two months before the spring 2009 parliamentary elections. This would benefit March 14 at the polls, he argued. Hamadeh was comfortable with the French position vis-a-vis the Tribunal, stating that, "The French are very firm on this front and have conveyed the message to the UN and the U.S."

¶14. (C) Hamadeh warned that Syrian President Bashar Asad was "liquidating" all possible witnesses in the Hariri assassination to "cut all the branches that could lead to his role in the assassination." A senior Syrian army officer, Ibrahim Safi, the head of the Palestine Branch in the Syrian intelligence, could have been killed in the Damascus explosion last month, he said.

MARCH 14 SECRETARIAT
DISCUSSES ELECTIONS STRATEGIES

¶15. (C) At the October 7 dinner, March 14 leaders also discussed their strategy for the 2009 parliamentary elections. Chamoun said the French agreed to send observers to monitor the 2009 parliamentary elections. Hamadeh,

however, cautioned that unless there was a large number of observers (i.e., more than 100), the elections would be flawed and could legitimize a possible March 8 victory. He stressed the need for observers to be heavily present in contested areas such as the southern suburbs of Beirut and the Armenian neighborhood of Burj Hammoud.

¶16. (C) The March 14 Secretariat members also discussed efforts to engage the pro-March 14 Lebanese diaspora to ensure success at the polls. Hamadeh said Lebanese living abroad should be contacted and encouraged to come to Lebanon and participate in the elections, even if that means renting private planes to bring them on voting day. March 14 needed to identify individuals whose votes in certain key districts, such as Baabda and Zahle, could make a difference. Hariri's Future Movement has experience in organizing charter airplanes, he said, but efforts should focus on Christian voters who are living abroad. There are 25,000 families of Lebanese origin living in France, and encouraging them to come to Lebanon on voting day would be beneficial for March ¶14.

¶17. (C) The Secretariat members also discussed March 14's message, which focuses on Lebanon's independence, sovereignty, and democratic principles. Souaid and others stressed the need to counter Hizballah, and warn the Christian community that voting for Michel Aoun was tantamount to turning Lebanon into an Iranian satellite. Mecattaf stressed the importance of reopening the Murr television (MTV) station to provide March 14 with the means to reach Christian audiences. MTV could also play a role in providing a voice for underrepresented groups who have no other media outlets, such as moderate Shia, he said.

¶18. (C) At the October 4 dinner, Mouawad said 90 percent of Lebanese abroad were pro-March 14. She and Lahoud were confident March 14 would win the elections, although Mouawad added that the elections were irrelevant since Hizballah already was taking over the state. Addressing Khouury's suggestion that the elections might not occur, Lahoud said that if both sides believed they would win, there would be

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elections.

¶18. (U) DAS Hale has cleared this message.
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